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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PRISTINA 000736

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SCHUFLETOWSKI, USOSCE FOR STEVE STEGER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/05/2016

TAGS: PGOV PREL KDEM UNMIK YI

SUBJECT: KOSOVO: INCREASED VOLUME OF ALBANIAN ATTACKS ON
DECENTRALIZATION CONCEPT

REF: PRISTINA 725

Classified By: COM TINA KAIDANOW FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: The recent appearance of the Kosovo negotiating team before the Kosovo Assembly and public criticism of key elements of the final status talks have resulted in protests against decentralization in the affected municipalities, as well as attacks by political "pundits" in the media claiming that the Unity Team (particularly Deputy Prime Minister Lutfi Haziri) has conceded too much to the Office of the UN Special Envoy. Much of this criticism has been leveled in the absence of any real knowledge about the provisions of the decentralization proposals, but that has not stopped the groundswell of indignation at the supposed prospect of "enclavizing" Kosovo -- i.e., giving away functional control over swaths of Kosovo territory. We expect the volume of criticism to increase in the coming weeks, but we also believe that it is in the interests of the final status process to air these issues publicly and stress the importance of an agreement on decentralization to the ultimate status decision. END SUMMARY.

Unity Team Goes Public

¶2. (C) Responding both to a growing degree of public interest in the content of UNOSEK-led negotiations in Vienna and to a "summons" by the Kosovo Assembly to account for its work, the Kosovar "Unity Team" appeared for the first time in front of the Assembly on September 1 to brief on its activities. The Assembly response to the Team's presentation was generally muted, though a number of the delegates took issue with the notion of "negotiating away" Kosovo's functionality through territorially-based decentralization (reftel). That criticism continued into the September 6 Assembly session, scheduled as a follow-on to the initial debate. Almost every Assembly member signed up to speak, and many of the comments were unflattering to the efforts of the Unity Team, though none of the delegates was bold or foolish enough to call for an end to negotiations.

Press Drumbeat Against Decentralization Mounts

¶3. (C) Spurred by the Assembly debate and always eager to

stir up controversy, the "yellow" segment of Kosovo's press and a half-baked stable of political "pundits" have seized on the provisions -- some actual, some imagined -- of the decentralization agreement and heaped venom on the alleged "enclavization" of Kosovo territory. Attacks have been leveled at the "transparency" of the Unity Team's work, with one commentator asserting a lack of communication between the negotiators and other political players; on the absence of coordination between Kosovo's central authorities and those municipalities most affected by the decentralization proposal; and on the "illegitimacy" of "giving away" territory to Serb control and thereby impairing Kosovo's eventual functionality. Former Gjilan mayor and current Deputy Prime Minister Lutfi Haziri has been singled out for the most vocal criticism given his prominent role in the decentralization talks, despite the fact that the Unity Team's positions are the product of mutual consensus and inter-party agreement.

Unhappiness Reflected on the Ground

¶4. (C) Press allegations aside, by far the most serious degree of unhappiness has been expressed by the leadership of those municipal areas whose boundaries are likely to be altered as the result of the creation of new Serb municipalities. Local apprehension at the outcome of the Vienna talks has manifested itself in the creation of strange political bedfellows; most recently, members of a broad spectrum of Kosovar parties -- including ruling coalition partners Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK) and the Alliance for the Future of Kosovo (AAK), the opposition PDK, the KLA Veterans Association, and Albin Kurti's Self-Determination Movement -- organized a protest in Viti against the final

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status negotiations. (NOTE: Under the current decentralization proposal, the proposed Serb-majority municipality of Kllokot/Vrbovac will be carved out of Viti municipality. END NOTE.) The protest attracted a crowd of about 400 participants, larger than previous demonstrations of this sort, though it was peaceful and controlled. Officials in Gjilan municipality are also considering organizing street protests on September 9. The local branch of the LDK in Gjilan, whose head is a supporter of ousted Kosovo Assembly president Nexhat Daci, issued a statement September 4 opposing the current decentralization plan.

Comment

¶5. (C) Thus far, none of the criticism aimed at the decentralization negotiations has taken on outsized proportions, but the atmospherics are slowly becoming more hostile as the realization dawns that decentralization will be meaningful and that status will require some tough choices. The critics are right in one sense; the Unity Team has done little to explain its efforts or to demonstrate why the creation of new Serb municipalities with substantial competencies will be so important to the eventual status outcome. This is a mistake they are slowly beginning to rectify with their public (and, encouragingly, joint) appearances. Nevertheless, the rising level of volume on decentralization, as well as reluctance to anger local party functionaries in key municipalities, will likely make the Unity Team ever more chary of taking bold steps. We will encourage them to ignore the short-term hits and keep their focus on the big picture, and we will be publicly supportive of their negotiating efforts as long as they are in keeping with UNOSEK expectations.

¶6. (SBU) U.S. Office Pristina clears this cable in its entirety for release to U.N. Special Envoy Martti Ahtisaari.
KAIDANOW